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ABSTRACT

The barriers to male participation in education and training initiatives in Ireland were examined in a qualitative study. The data collection methods were as follows: (1) semi-structured focus groups with a total of 41 men participating in training initiatives at five sites across Ireland; (2) in-depth interviews with 20 of the men; (3) a literature review; and (4) a review of government responses and interventions in the area of male education and training. The identified barriers to male participation in training fell into the following categories: (1) the construction of masculinity; (2) the school experience; (3) developing identity; and (4) changing gender roles. Although the five learning environments studied differed from the standpoints of their operation, purpose, function in the community, the following universal value system emerged across the five programs' methodologies: (1) providing individual responses to individual needs; (2) restoring self-belief and thereby inspiring agency in the learner; (3) building relationships between facilitators/tutors and learners on a foundation of mutual respect and trust; (4) providing a nonthreatening, noncompetitive, flexible, and comfortable environment; and (5) facilitating the acquisition of skills in a purposeful and meaningful way. The focus group format and interview guide are appended. (Contains 35 references.) (MN)

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MEN ON THE MOVE

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A STUDY OF BARRIERS TO MALE PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING INITIATIVES

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By Toni Owens

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Abstract

This research report takes a qualitative approach to exploring barriers to men in accessing education and training initiatives in Ireland. Chapter One introduces its sponsor AONTAS, explains the rationale behind the study and the research aims. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature and discusses government responses and interventions in the area of male education and training. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, introduces the five learning environments that participated in the study and presents a profile of the study sample while protecting individual identities. Chapter Four presents the study findings in two sections. Section One of Chapter Four discusses barriers to participation under four headings that emerged as the most significant themes in the participants' lives: the construction of masculinity, the school experience, developing identity and changing gender roles. Section Two of Chapter Four looks at the impact of the educational experience on the lives of the study participants. Chapter Five looks at models of practice and their philosophical approaches across the five learning environments. Chapter Six discusses the implications of issues arising from the study findings and offers initial direction for further research.

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Chapter One

Introduction and Rationale for the Study

AONTAS is the Irish National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. Over thirty years in existence, it comprises a diverse membership drawn from the Statutory, Community and Voluntary sectors. AONTAS recognises the key political role adult education plays in combating poverty and inequality, as well as promoting democracy, creativity and economic development. It thus exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education that is accessible to and inclusive of all.

Rationale

During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s AONTAS experienced a rapid influx into its membership of groups from the Voluntary and Community Education sector. While the majority of these groups were run by and for women, many of them also provided a wide range of services for their entire communities. These evolving groups saw membership of AONTAS as a means of gaining recognition and support for their developmental work within disadvantaged communities. AONTAS responded by working directly with women's groups through two European funded projects under the Employment Initiative NOW (New Opportunities for Women) and, more recently, the WENDI project (Women's Education Networks Development Initiative) funded by the Department of Education and Science's Women's Education Initiative (WEI).

The success of its educational work with marginalised women inspired AONTAS to seek ways to address the needs of disadvantaged men. While men generally tend to follow vocational or job related training interventions which are supported by government funding or by their employer, concern is increasing at the considerable number of men remaining outside of this process. Because of the success of women's groups in attracting hard to reach potential participants onto their programmes at community level, it has often been assumed that such a model could work equally well for isolated men experiencing difficulty in accessing mainstream provision. However, encouraging men to come together to discuss and address their needs proved more difficult than anticipated. Thus, in 1999 AONTAS, with the aid of funding from the Department of Education and Science, initiated this study to explore reasons behind the noticeable absence of a large number of men from both mainstream and community education provision.

The Research aims to:

- Identify key barriers to men's participation in current education and training initiatives
- Identify key supports necessary to increase male motivation to participate in the education process
- Highlight models of good practice
- Identify and recommend ways by which educational policy and practice may best be developed to serve the needs of today's adult male.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

The body of published research on adult participation in education and training in Ireland is scant and very little of it takes a specifically male focus, although a number of factors appear to be drawing increasing attention to the need for further research. Perhaps the most significant factor lies in the alarming findings of the 1997 OECD Literacy Survey. The findings reveal that twenty-five per cent of the Irish population are situated at level one on the literacy scale and fifty-three per cent are below level three, the level deemed necessary to be fully functional in society. In addition, demographic trends indicate that while the number of eighteen-year-olds in the indigenous population is likely to fall over the next decade, the size of the workforce is projected to grow until 2005. These estimates indicate that:

> ...there will be a marked decline in the outflow of highly qualified young people to meet skill needs. This highlights the urgency of concerted investment in raising the skill levels of the unemployed and of those seeking to re-enter the labour force, if competitiveness and growth are to be maintained.
>
> (Green Paper: *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*, 1998, p28)

Furthermore, while the economy is currently booming, many employers are unable to fill vacancies from the home labour market whilst at the same time a significant number of long-term unemployed people remain on the Live Register, suggesting a mismatch between skills and competencies available and employers' requirements. Thus, the persistence of long-term unemployment in the current thriving economy indicates the need for further inquiry concerning provision of, access to, and participation in adult education and training.

Broadly speaking, the research literature adopts a four-stranded conceptual framework within which the complex mix of barriers to accessing and participating in education and training are analysed. In this model, impeding factors are identified as constituting institutional, informational, situational and/or dispositional barriers. The institutional dimension encompasses the image, ethos, administrative and pedagogical practices, as well as the physical environment used by education and training providers. The informational domain concerns the availability, range, quality and reliability of information on education and training, as well as the media used and methods adopted in the dissemination of information. The situational aspect is concerned with the individual's life-situation, looking at the extent to which one's level of such resources as time and/or money influences participation in education. Finally, the dispositional aspect is concerned with the complex and less tangible domain of the individual's perceptions, feelings, thoughts and attitudes.

Ronayne adds a fifth strand to this conceptual framework, which he names as contextual barriers, arguing that:

> The models proposed do not take into account in a sufficient manner factors such as prevailing economic and labour market circumstances, the actions of the state in promoting education and training, and the circumstances and needs of educationally disadvantaged adults, particularly those who are also unemployed.
>
> (WRC Social & Economic Consultants / Dept. Education & Science, 1999, p18)

Thus, in Ronayne's framework:

> Contextual barriers refer to prevailing labour market conditions, the policy stance toward issues such as social exclusion and educational disadvantage, and the mix of programmes targeted toward the long-term unemployed. They also include factors deriving from societal, reference group, and peer orientations concerning the value of education.
>
> (WRC/DES, 1999, pp18-19)

Clearly this model broadens the conceptual framework to facilitate analysis of the wider political, structural and cultural context in which education is operative.

In view of the 1997 OECD Literacy Survey findings, it is hardly surprising that literacy difficulties should emerge as one of the most frequently cited barriers to participation in education and training initiatives. The implications of literacy difficulties for the self and for participation in society are brought sharply into focus by the survey authors:

> Exposure to reading material provides pre-school children with a 'formative skill' in their initial development which will later affect vocabulary, the communication of ideas and experience, the establishment of thinking skills, and healthy social interaction and emotional expression. In school, literacy competence offers an essential foundation for acquiring other, higher-order cognitive skills. The IALS has amply demonstrated that literacy is an essential work skill; beyond that, it is a life skill that enables social, cultural, and political participation.
>
> (OECD, 1997, p11)

Responsibility to effect the solution to Ireland's literacy problem clearly rests in the contextual and institutional domains, while the key barrier to participating in literacy provision lies in the dispositional sphere because of the profound stigma attached to literacy difficulties. Typically, across the literature, men who are 'missing' from education and training are characterised as being over the age of thirty-five, unemployed, with low levels of educational and skill qualifications and consequently having literacy difficulties. Yet, as the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is "struck by the low number of unemployed people attending literacy schemes", it is clear that these men are not accessing literacy provision in significant numbers (Bailey & Coleman, 1998, p14). NALA's qualitative research demonstrates the highly sensitive nature of the literacy issue where people 'feel embarrassed' or 'afraid' to seek help with their difficulties. Thus, NALA highlights the need for literacy provision to be integrated into education and training initiatives targeted at unemployed people for two reasons. Firstly, it would alleviate embarrassment at 'being seen' going to literacy classes; and secondly, it would situate the acquisition of literacy skills in a more holistic framework of personal and skill development. The just published *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (2000) outlines measures for a National Adult Literacy Programme which, if implemented, will address NALA's call for an integrated approach to literacy provision. It is worth noting, however, that at present volunteers from the general public provide eighty-five per cent of literacy tuition (Murphy, 2000, p26).

FAS provision falls into two broad categories: Community Employment (CE) comprising work experience based programmes largely operative in the social economy; and training courses, of which Specific Skills Training (SST) forms the largest strand. The literature notes the predominance of older long-term unemployed people on CE, whilst under twenty-five, relatively higher educated clients dominate SST. Two key institutional barriers are identified by providers, clients and researchers as contributing to the low number of older men participating in skills training. These are inhibiting entry qualification requirements and failure to tailor programmes to cater for the special needs of the older client, who has generally been out of the workforce for a longer duration. It will become evident over time whether the recently designed FAS 'bridging programmes' can significantly increase the number of older men accessing mainstream training.

Qualitative studies, although limited in number, repeatedly cite lack of confidence and low self-esteem as key dispositional barriers to participation in education and training initiatives (Bailey & Coleman 1998, Cousins 1997b, WRC/DES 1999). These researchers adopt a range of methodologies including participatory action research and open-ended interviewing to shed light on the experiences and views of non-participants. If the special needs of educationally disadvantaged adults are to be met by reform in the institutional domain, arguably this endeavour must be underpinned by the development of a comprehensive body of qualitative research. The insights and findings of such research would provide vital clues to the innovations necessary for providers to successfully reach, attract and retain society's most marginalised individuals.

The literature highlights a number of programmes specifically tailored to meet the needs of long-term unemployed people as examples of good practice. These programmes are praised for their sensitive approach, structured support mechanisms, labour market relevance and progression outcomes. The Tramlines and Workmate Over 40s Projects in Ballymun and the Over 35s Project in Coolock comprise the most notable of these initiatives. In her evaluation of the Tramlines Project, O'Donnell argues that the project proved "that high-end training programmes tailored for long-term unemployed people can move them into the labour market as valued employees with needed skills" (O'Donnell, 1998, p1). O'Donnell also points to the positive impact of the project for the self-esteem of the individual and well being of the family and community. Tramlines has been successfully mainstreamed through the Online course offered at a local Vocational Education Committee (VEC); and acted as a model for the mainstream Fast Track to Information Technology (FIT) programme. The Over 35s Project, as its name suggests, is specifically targeted at an older age group. The programme integrates personal development with skills training and is lauded for its sensitivity and responsiveness to the particular developmental and learning needs of this group (Area Development Management Ltd., 1998).

Regarding informational barriers, there is agreement across the literature that improvements could be made on the part of service providers that would result in provision of a more comprehensive support framework for unemployed people in need of information, guidance and counselling. Enhanced communication and networking between service providers such as Local Employment Services (LES), FAS, VECs and Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) Jobs Facilitators, and development of effective outreach strategies, are the two most frequently cited recommendations to combat informational barriers. Government proposals for the establishment of Local Adult Learning Boards and a National Adult Guidance and Counselling Service carry the promise for the development of a more welcoming and coherent framework within which unemployed people could make informed choices and plans.

The situational dimension is concerned with the relationship between levels of such resources as time and money and participation rates. Informational and situational factors frequently overlap for unemployed people in the process of weighing up options and making choices. As every penny is significant for people trying to cope on welfare payments, any loss of entitlement resulting from participation in education or training constitutes a major barrier. In the absence of a coherent information and guidance framework, information on entitlements is often gleaned 'through the grapevine', resulting in transference of misinformation and potential participants remaining unaware of financial incentives which could tip the balance in favour of participation (European Social Fund (ESF) Programme Evaluation Unit, 1998).

The need for development of effective networking and outreach strategies is highlighted by the findings of a recent survey of adult long-term unemployed people conducted in Dundalk, revealing that:

> Over half of the respondents had not met with personnel from either FAS, LES or DSCFA (Jobs Facilitators) during the current period of unemployment; this figure rose to two-thirds among those respondents identified as being at greatest risk of continuing unemployment.
>
> **(WRC/DEP, 1999)**

The White Paper on Adult Education offers proposals to address such lapses through the appointment of one Community Education Facilitator in each VEC area and two in the Community Education Technical Support Unit at national level, whose key functions will include promoting and supporting the networking process.

Key criticisms levelled against CE include its inadequate training component and its failure to act as a meaningful progression route to the open labour market. Such criticism is justified in view of the sentiments expressed by unemployed participants in an Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU) action research project conducted across four geographical areas (Blanchardstown, Ballyfermot, Castlebar and Dundalk):

> *I thought CE was about teaching you to go back to work. I was basically sweeping floors, moving tables etc. I could do that type of work at home. I feel I can do more. I want to learn computers. I was told nothing about the £300 training money.*
>
> *After completing CE you are not guaranteed a job. That year on CE is better spent doing training.*
>
> *You're only taken off the dole and you're put back on it again a year later. That happened to me and I was on the three-year option.*
>
> **(cited in INOU, 1998, pp43-44)**

INOU note that its study participants who had participated in CE in one entire geographical area were unaware that a training allowance is allocated to CE participants. It could thus be assumed that, operationally, the training element of CE is very much dependent on the discretion and goodwill of the sponsor.

While most of the literature uses the four-stranded conceptual framework to analyse reasons for non-participation in education and training, Ronayne's five-stranded framework offers a more comprehensive explanatory model. His analysis of contextual barriers reveals the extent to which conditions in the labour market and government policy are influencing factors in participation and non-participation rates. The following table shows a breakdown of the numbers participating in active labour market programmes (ALMPs) for the long-term unemployed in 1998:

Active Labour Market Programmes for LTU	**Number**	**%**
Employment Programmes		
Community Employment (CE)	40,000	46.2
Back to Work Allowance Scheme (BTWA)	24,250	28.0
Training Programmes		
FAS Training	12,110	14.0
CERT Training	1,200	1.4
Education Programmes		
Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)	4,440	5.1
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)	4,630	5.3
Total	**86,630**	**100.0**

(WRC/DES, 1999, p20)

Ronayne accounts for the high proportion of participants on employment-based programmes and low percentage of participation in educational programmes by pointing to the policy arena. The following table shows the breakdown of expenditure on improving employability in the *Employment Action Plan 1999*:

	IR£ millions	***%***
Public Employment and Training Services (Admin)	60.9	6.0
Active Labour Market Programmess / In-work subsidies	401.3	39.4
Training / Education	139.1	13.6
Other Employability-Enhancing Expenditure	415.0	40.7
Schemes Supporting Employment of people with Disabilities	3.1	0.3
Total	**1,019.4**	**100.0**

(WRC/DES, 1999, p21)

Ronayne argues that while the current policy stance, as evidenced in the Green Paper on Adult Education (1998), seems favourably disposed to enabling unemployed people to access education programmes, the overall policy package aimed at combating long-term unemployment places higher emphasis on transitions to work than on transitions to education. Ronayne supports his argument by highlighting the limited amount of resources devoted to adult education compared with expenditure on employment supports and vocational training. (WRC/DES, 1999, pp21-22)

A number of reasons for the higher participation of older males on CE than on training programmes are identified in the literature. Impeding entry requirements for FAS mainstream training has already been mentioned; along with the lack of specially tailored, labour market relevant training initiatives targeted at long-term unemployed people. However, the most frequently cited reason for participation on CE is the significantly higher level of financial reward derived from this programme than from education and training initiatives. Returning to the policy arena, in view of government endorsement of the concepts of Lifelong Learning and of promoting equality through addressing educational disadvantage, Ronayne questions the philosophy and rationale underpinning the discrepancy between financial incentives for 'earning' and those for 'learning'.

Ronayne argues that the promotion of CE over education and training, whilst it may yield short-term gains for all, may also in the long run contribute to the persistence of educational disadvantage among long-term unemployed people. He is concerned both with the nature of choices that are offered to long-term unemployed people, particularly those over thirty-five, and the government's failure to promote the value of education. He argues that making employment initiatives more attractive than education initiatives "may implicitly convey a message that education, and to a lesser extent, training is not for you". This in turn, he argues, may reinforce negative views of education and training and contribute to the cycle of disadvantage. Ronayne outlines three alarming features on the education and training landscape. Firstly, the number of people on employment programmes, particularly CE, currently exceeds the number in training. Secondly, there are currently over eight times as many persons with no formal second level qualification on Back To Work Allowance as on VTOS. Thirdly, Ronayne concludes that over the decade of its development, VTOS, in the main, has placed itself "out of reach" for the very people it was designed to serve, namely those who are most educationally disadvantaged as indicated by a lack of formal second level qualifications. (WRC/DES, 1999)

In "*Reaching the Excluded*" Ronayne (1999) discusses three philosophical paradigms for approaches to education: the Human Resource / Employability paradigm; the Social Cohesion / Human Potential paradigm; and the Equality paradigm. Ronayne suggests that Irish educational policy, when viewed within the wider context of policies to eradicate long-term unemployment, favours the Human Resource / Employability paradigm. In other words, the needs of the economy are being given primacy over the needs of individuals and

well being of communities. Ronayne outlines the benefits of the second and third paradigms within the context of Lifelong Learning and Anti-Poverty agenda. The Social Cohesion / Human Potential paradigm is concerned not just with exclusion from the labour market, but also with the right to the realisation of one's human potential. The Equality paradigm is concerned with structural inequalities influencing access, participation and outcomes in education. Thus Ronayne's paper calls for all government departments to cohere in developing integrated policies, not just to combat unemployment per se, but to promote and support the development of human potential and social cohesion. (Ronayne, 1999)

The Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht pilot project entitled Arts Awareness Intervention Two (AAI2), coordinated by Creative Activity for Everyone (CAFE) across seven locations nationwide between 1996 and 1998, specifically targeted unemployed men, aiming:

> To offer the opportunity for men who were experiencing long-term unemployment to get involved in a group and experience a variety of arts activities; and to explore how arts activities might act as a bridge to further training and development.
>
> **(Hayes, 1998, p38)**

The Social Cohesion / Human Potential and Equality paradigms are evident in the project's final evaluation report which, while celebrating progression outcomes for some of its participants, argues that, for others:

> ...outcomes other than training or employment might be equally valid. For some, it was an opportunity to engage in a dialogue at community level while for others it led to questioning and greater insight into the systems and structures in which they found themselves. Some participants saw themselves developing as artists in their own right. ... Programmes like AAI2 offer men the opportunity to create a wider horizon for themselves through finding artistic expression or through developing a purpose and role in the wider community. Access may be as much about creating a vision for a better lifestyle as about moving on to a formal training programme or a paid job.
>
> **(Hayes, 1998, pp31-42)**

The Social Cohesion / Human Potential and Equality paradigms are central in the growing Community Education sector with its philosophical and pedagogical emphasis on the role of education in facilitating growth, development and empowerment at individual and collective level. The increasing significance of this sector is reflected in the rapidly changing character of AONTAS membership and indeed in the direction of its work in recent years. Since 1996 there has been an increase of sixty-nine per cent in membership from the Community and Voluntary sector, which now comprises two thirds of its total group membership.

The Community Education sector faces many challenges both in its own development and within the policy arena. Key challenges centre on: developing consensus on a definition of Community Education which is inclusive of its many facets; developing and documenting models of good practice; resolving issues relating to accreditation and progression routes; and gaining representation on emerging structures in adult education and local government. Highlighting these challenges in depth, *Community Education: AONTAS Policy Series 1* (2000):

> ...has been published with a view to developing an understanding of Community Education and the key role it plays in providing access for non traditional learners; we hope it will serve as a focus for debate and discussion on how to build an integrated Adult Education Service. (p22)

AONTAS welcomes the extent to which the White Paper recognises the value and supports the role of Community Education in Irish society; the proposed new systems and structures offer the potential for the development, through education, of a more inclusive society. However, as the Community Education sector gains increasing significance, the Green Paper notes that:

> 80% of community education participants are women and it is evident that there is a need for new strategies if more male participants are to be attracted into the system. (p53)

On a stronger note, the Katharine Howard Foundation, while noting and celebrating women's achievements in Irish society, also points to:

> ...a considerable number of men who are identifiable by the fact that they have little or no participation in family life, community life or employment; typically they are unskilled, uneducated and unemployed. Many are turning to drink, drugs and suicide; they have become marginalised within society.
>
> **(Katharine Howard Foundation, 1999, p1)**

With this stark reality in mind, the Foundation's Community Grants Scheme specifically targeted men's groups in 1997 and 1998 but "the level of response was disappointing and the Foundation was left with many unanswered questions about why this should be so" (Katharine Howard Foundation, 1999, p1). In pursuit of such answers, the Foundation is currently co-sponsoring a comprehensive research project under the working title *Marginalised Men: Unskilled, Uneducated, Unemployed and Socially Excluded - What Went Wrong? - Present Help and future Prevention.*

In her recent research on men who are 'missing' from education in the UK, McGivney gives depth and breath to her discussion by drawing on the works of a range of writers across the disciplines of sociology, psychology and the growing field of men's studies. McGivney discusses the challenge to traditional definitions of masculinity in a rapidly changing world and explores the relationship between that challenge and participation in education, training and employment. Based on the premise that male identity is chiefly derived from employment, McGivney highlights the plight of those whose skills and competencies are no longer required in the workplace. Pointing to working-class culture where "male identity is rooted in manual labour", McGivney suggests:

> Many working-class men are experiencing a cruel dilemma: the kind of employment they want is in short supply but their sense of identity is so bound up with traditional labour that they find it difficult to engage in different jobs or alternative activities. Some are consequently failing to adjust to changed social and economic conditions and their basic assumptions and expectations, especially regarding gender roles, have not caught up with the cultural transformations that have taken place over the last decades.
>
> **(McGivney, 1999, p67)**

While this view focuses on the challenge that economic and social change poses for working-class identity, McGivney cites Kimmel's (1996) view that such change is impinging on male identity across all strata of society:

> Our lives have changed dramatically but what has not changed are the ideas we have about what it means to be a man. The structure of our lives has changed, but not our culture, the ideologies that give that structure meaning. This is what social scientists used to call 'culture lag'; where the technology and institutional framework of a society changes more rapidly than the culture's stock of meanings and interpretations of social structure. The 1990s have found men constantly bumping up against the limitations of the traditional definition of what it means to be a man, but without much sense of direction about where they might go to look for an alternative.
>
> **(cited in McGivney, 1999, p67)**

In Ireland, although published too late for in-depth consideration in this review, Clare's work *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis* endorses the view that masculinity is experiencing difficulty defining itself in the modern world; while McKeown et al., agree that "the male role and masculinity no longer match the reality of the circumstances in which men live and work" (*Changing Fathers?: Fatherhood and Family Life in Modern Ireland*, 1998, ppxiii). It is noteworthy that the question of male identity in today's world also emerged as a central concern in the lives of the participants in this study and their peers. In Ireland, the question of what it means to be a man today is only beginning to emerge as an important issue

impinging on the lives of men, especially those who are marginalised. There is thus urgent need for research on this issue if an understanding is to be reached on the relationship between the meaning of masculinity and participation in education and wider society. McGivney's discussion highlights the need for researchers in the field of education to draw on insights and findings across a broad range of disciplines including sociology, psychology and men's studies.

It is widely documented that women's increasing participation in education, training and public life stems from the growth and proliferation of women's groups over recent decades. While the literature notes that men are less likely than women to form such groups, a number of men's groups and networks are indeed gradually emerging in Ireland. While the development of men's groups is a pioneering endeavour, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (1999) highlights the positive social impact, at individual and community level, of the work of one of the contributors to this study, the South East Men's Network. However, because of their anti-poverty focus, funding for community groups has to date come largely from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, thereby obscuring their important educational dimension. AONTAS has argued that community groups' record of engaging the most marginalised in their programmes is a powerful indicator of their value, rendering them worthy of recognition and support as the first rung on the ladder of progression. The Department of Education and Science's recent expansion of the Women's Education Initiative into the Education Equality Initiative is a welcome acknowledgment of the essential educational value of community groups.

Thus, the proposed structured development of men's groups within the Community Education sector; the development of more flexible entry, delivery, progression and accreditation structures; and proposals for a more integrated approach to literacy provision, all point to the emergence of a more welcoming and accessible educational arena for men. Will such developments attract more men into education and training programmes? What are the barriers to their participation?

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

Qualitative researchers take a holistic approach to researching human action and interaction. Their varied methodologies take account of individuality and the contexts in which human experiences occur, and they seek to understand and explain phenomena from the perspectives of their study participants. This study adopts the qualitative approach devised by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) who draw on the work of their predecessors and contemporaries to arrive at a methodology which uses the constant comparative method of data analysis and presents its findings within an interpretative-descriptive framework.

Research Sample

In its quest to identify barriers to participation in education and training for the long-term unemployed, the European Social Fund Programme Evaluation Unit found that "it proved difficult to reach those we can see from national statistics do not engage in mainstream provision" (ESF Programme Evaluation Unit, 1998, p111). Noting this difficulty, five learning environments were approached with a view to drawing the study sample from volunteers who, whilst currently engaged in the learning process, had previously experienced alienation from education and training provision and whose peer group include non-participants in education. It was anticipated that the views, insights and experiences articulated by this sample would provide an understanding of the world of non-participants in education and training. Introduced alphabetically, the learning environments include urban and rural as well as formal and informal settings:

Ballymun Men's Centre: Operating under the umbrella of the Community and Family Training Agency, the centre was founded to address some of the issues facing men living in Ballymun. Such issues include unemployment, family breakdown, isolation, depression and substance abuse. Founded in 1991, the organisation's membership met once weekly until 1997 when, in recognition of its value to the community, it was granted its own premises and became operational on a full-time basis. The centre has an informal drop-in dimension as well as a structured programme of activities for its membership of thirty. These activities include: workshops and seminars on issues of concern to men, especially focusing on men's changing roles; connecting men to other groups and services in the locale; literacy and computer tuition; arts and crafts; outings to places of cultural or historical interest; and linking with other men's groups.

Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC): Funded by the Department of Education and Science, City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee and FAS, the centre offers a range of courses and facilities to the north inner city community and beyond. Developing since 1974 (formerly the Dublin Literacy Scheme), its core programmes include literacy, numeracy, computers, personal development and inter-personal skills courses. The centre also offers: NCVA Foundation and Level One programmes in English, Math and Communications; Junior Certificate English and Math; and Leaving Certificate English. In addition, it runs an

intensive basic education programme specifically targeted at long-term unemployed people. Programmes are offered on a one-to-one as well as group basis, during daytime as well as evening hours; and male participants comprise thirty-four per cent of its students.

Liberties Men's Group: The Liberties Men's Group was founded in January 1999 as a direct result of Cousins' (1997b) research highlighting the under-representation of unemployed, over thirty-five males from the southwest inner city in education and training initiatives. Funded for its first year by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs and Katharine Howard Foundation, the group was founded to encourage and support men from the locality to participate in education. It calls itself a 'gateway to education' as it links men to relevant programmes and provides ongoing support. The group's membership comprises ten men over the age of thirty-five and their fortnightly meetings provide a forum for encouragement and support in the learning process. The group's activities include debating issues of concern to men in today's world, forging links with other men's groups and outings to places of cultural and historical interest. The majority of its members are participating in a wide range of education and training programmes including Trinity Access Programme, Youth and Community Studies at NUI Maynooth, various programmes at the Warrenmount Family Resource Centre and Community Employment Schemes. The remaining members are receiving support from the group in rebuilding belief in themselves and their potential, as the first step in equipping them for participation in education.

South East Men's Network (SEMN): Established in 1996, the network is core funded by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs for its Men's Development Project, operant across ten groups in the region to support men affected by unemployment, poverty and marginalisation. The project operates at individual and collective level to equip and empower men to analyse and address their circumstances and roles in a rapidly changing world. Its central activity facilitates personal growth and development through group discussion whereby men are encouraged to express their feelings and views on issues of concern and are supported in developing and executing strategies to improve their lives and the lives of their families and communities. Complementary activities facilitate acquisition of a range of inter-personal and practical skills through planning, organising and facilitating local, regional and national workshops, seminars and conferences centering on men's issues. The project's core aim is 'to achieve change in men, by men and with men', and thereby create a more humane, just and egalitarian society for all. Networking facilitates the development, expansion and passing on of experiences, expertise and skills from man to man, group to group, community to community, county to county and so forth. It is thus an ongoing, self-perpetuating process of change. The SEMN has a founding membership of twenty-five men and a cyclical membership of one hundred to one hundred and twenty.

Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS): VTOS was introduced on a national basis in 1989 to replace the Educational Opportunities Scheme piloted in 1986. VTOS provides education and training programmes of up to two years' duration for Social Welfare

recipients who meet specified eligibility criteria. At present, the Department of Education and Science draws up guidelines for the operation of the scheme, but programmes are managed and delivered at local level by Vocational Education Committees. VTOS currently operates on a full-time basis of thirty hours per week for forty-three weeks of the year. It aims to provide a second chance opportunity for adults to acquire education or training qualifications necessary to secure employment or to avail of further education. VTOS participants may pursue a wide range of courses though, in practice, choice is dependent on VEC provision in the locality. However, the White Paper outlines administrative and operational changes for VTOS proposed to lend greater versatility and flexibility to the scheme.

Newbridge VTOS programme ranges from provision of basic education to third level foundation courses. It aims to prepare participants for employment or further education / training in such diverse fields as accountancy, information technology, the arts, community care, secretarial and office administration, and the printing / publishing / advertising / graphic design industries. The principle of 'Personalised Learning' (PL) is a key feature of the Newbridge VTOS centre. In this methodology, students are encouraged and supported in identifying their own learning needs and designing their own learning programmes. The PL ideal is realised through provision of mentoring and one-to-one learning, an approach which demands that the centre's programme be flexible and its tutors ever alert and attuned to their students' needs. Currently, one hundred and twenty students are participating in the Newbridge VTOS programme, one third of whom are male.

Focus of Inquiry

Maykut and Morehouse's methodology requires the researcher to frame the research questions in the form of a focus of inquiry statement. The focus of inquiry, which provides initial direction on entering the field under study, may be broadened or narrowed as data collection progresses and salient themes in the participants' world begin to emerge. The focus of inquiry statement for this study was framed as follows:

> AONTAS wishes to identify barriers to male participation in existing education and training initiatives. It is thus important to gain an understanding of men's perceptions of education and training and gain insight into how these perceptions influence their expectations and interactions in the educational and wider social spheres.

Data Collection

Framed by the focus of inquiry, five semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted across the learning environments. A total of forty-one men attended the focus group sessions flagging up their dominant concerns and issues regarding education, training, the changing workplace and home life (Appendix 1). From this total, twenty men volunteered to take part in in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interviews to facilitate further exploration of these concerns on a more personal and intimate level (Appendix 2). Under guaranteed conditions of anonymity these twenty volunteers communicated their insights and experiences with palpable honesty and generosity of spirit.

Profile of Study Participants

Ranging in age from twenty to sixty-five, the volunteers were evenly divided between the formal and informal education sectors, with ten involved in learning through men's groups and ten attending classes. Six had left school on completion or near completion of their primary education. Eight had progressed to the junior cycle of second level education, three of whom achieved certification. Six had completed the senior cycle of second level schooling, all of whom achieved certification. One was awarded a university degree through entering third level education directly upon leaving secondary school, one had secured a university degree by attending an evening modular programme and one had achieved his third level degree though attending university as a full-time mature student on Third Level Allowance.

Seven had had no engagement in the education process between the time of leaving school and their current participation. One had returned to education to secure his Leaving Certificate by night. One had attended training courses in his workplace. Two had participated in CE schemes, one as a janitor in a school building, the other as a caretaker in a graveyard. Four had attended FAS courses in computers, business and sales. Six had pursued courses for personal enhancement in such areas as reflexology, computers and business studies.

Sixteen of the men's career paths had consisted of unskilled or semi-skilled positions in the catering, construction, manufacturing and transport sectors. One had pursued a career in the army. Of the three university graduates, two had become founding members of their respective men's groups, and one had worked in the accountancy field for a number of years.

At the time of their participation in the study, two were long-term unemployed; one was in receipt of an ill-health pension and three were retired. Six were employed in the community on Job Initiative (JI) or CE Schemes and three were in full-time employment. Five were participating in VTOS, two of whom were working part-time in catering and construction to supplement their allowances.

Data Analysis

The focus group discussions and individual interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for data analysis. The constant comparative method of data analysis involves a systematic distilling for meaning from the recorded words of the study participants framed by the researcher's focus of inquiry. As Maykut and Morehouse explain: "Words are the way that most people come to understand their situations. We create our world with words. We explain ourselves with words. We defend and hide ourselves with words" (1994, p18). Thus, the researcher's task lies in identifying and analysing recurring words, phrases, themes, topics and concepts in order to gain an understanding of the participants' world and worldview.

In their focus group discussions and at one-to-one interviews, the study participants reiterated and affirmed the informational, situational and institutional barriers identified and discussed in the literature review. However, barriers that within the four-stranded conceptual

framework might be categorised as dispositional were apportioned greater emphases in the conversations. In Maykut and Morehouse's methodology, data are not slotted into predetermined categories, rather, categories of meaning emerge over the course of the study as the researcher pursues and analyses dominant themes in the participants' world. The most salient categories of meaning in the study participants' world emerged as four overlapping and interconnected themes:

- The construction of masculinity
- The school experience
- The development of identity
- Changing gender roles

Peer group dynamics emerged as a significant motif underpinning all four themes, and these themes provide the framework within which the study findings are presented in Chapter Four.

Pursuit of these themes increasingly drew the research into the interior world of the study participants yielding a wealth of insight into the men's perceptions of their external world and how these perceptions influence their participation in the educational and wider social spheres. In seeking to explain barriers to participation in education as perceived by the study participants, the researcher derived a conceptual model from the rich and powerful language used by the men in communicating their perspectives and insights. In this model Taboo Zone refers to prohibitions and restrictions that pose barriers to participation in education and First Base Headspace refers to the process of overcoming these barriers.

Chapter Four

Research Findings - From Taboo Zone to First Base Headspace

Section 1: Taboo Zone:

> *You know, ten years ago someone asked me 'how do you feel, what are you?' and I replied that I was a piece of cosmic dust on the edge of the universe. And I was talking about myself recently, about how I feel today, and you know, I said 'I'm truly truly alive'. Now I said that recently, that's about me, it's about where I am today compared to ten years ago. Education changed me and I would like to see that change happen for all working-class men. Because if that change doesn't happen, a lot of guys are going to stay long-term unemployed, isolated, frustrated, get angry, violent, you know, if they don't reach some sort of personal view of themselves that is warm or humane, we're going to have a lot of problems with lads. And I think it's going to get worse.*

This speaker's previous perception of himself as a reduced, insignificant and powerless 'piece of cosmic dust' compared with his now joyful sense of being 'truly truly alive' powerfully illustrates the deeply personal dimension of the learning experience and the positive implications of education for perceptions of the self. However, his depiction of himself as less than human, mere 'cosmic dust' and of his peers in need of reaching 'warm and humane' perceptions of themselves provides graphic insight into the sense of alienation experienced by the socially excluded in Irish society. Such depictions reflect a deeply internalised sense of worthlessness and powerlessness, suggesting that the greatest barriers to participation in education may be located deep within the self. The metaphors and phraseology used by the men in articulating their experiences resulted in the researcher's coinage of Taboo Zone as the most fitting and useful term for conceptualising these interior barriers to participation in education and wider social spheres. Taboo Zone is a multi-determined oppression of the head and heart whereby one feels as powerless and meaningless as 'a piece of cosmic dust' and identity is derived and directed from without rather than constructed from within the self.

The findings suggest that Taboo Zone oppression is rooted both in the school experience and in the wider cultural milieu wherein dominant ideologies of the social order and masculinity dictate one's way of perceiving and being in the world.

The Construction of Masculinity

While homophobia was the most commonly cited barrier to joining men's groups, the term 'this macho thing' was frequently evoked as a barrier to participation in educational programmes of a more general kind. The participants' range of explanations of these terms pointed to the question of male identity in today's world as a central concern in their lives. Their articulated experiences of masculinity support Kimmel's suggestion that "masculinity is a public enactment, demonstrated and proved in the public domain before the evaluative eyes of other men" (Kimmel, 1996, p45). Thus, through the 'evaluative eyes' of the peer group as well as the wider brotherhood of man, ideologies of masculinity are constructed, sustained and reproduced; and the degree of servitude to those 'evaluative eyes' indicates the extent to which Taboo Zone oppression governs the self.

Through assigning traits and thereby justifying roles, gender ideologies regulate ways of being in the world. As Kimmel points out, the dominant model of masculinity is constructed through renunciation of traits and behaviours identified as feminine, thus women and gay men become the 'others' in opposition to whom 'real man' is defined and affirmed. In this model 'real man' is identified as heterosexual, brave and strong, and he does not show his emotions, especially to other men. Failure to realise this ideal renders him not 'real man' but weak and womanlike, a sissy. (Kimmel, 1994, pp119-141) The ideological construction of masculinity as 'strong' and femininity as 'weak' strives to make the patriarchal order and power structure appear natural and inevitable. While ideologies that justify the subordination of women continue to be highlighted and contested by feminism, the implications of patriarchy for relations of power between men is gaining increasing attention in men's studies. As Kimmel points out, "we equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control; the definitions of manhood we have developed maintain the power that some men have over other men and that men have over women" (Kimmel, 1994, p125). So how is this power relationship between men exercised? The study participants provide insight:

> *You're asking me about the way men relate to men. I'll tell you. It's about dominance, acceptance, finding your place in the hierarchical structure. It's not acceptable to show a soft side or weakness.*

> *Men are constantly in competition with each other. Even in the pub you want to be able to drink more than the next fella. You want to drive faster than the next fella. You want to have a bigger car than the next fella. So if a fella says to you 'I'm in difficulty' you say to yourself 'he's weak, I've beaten him, I can skip him now he's no threat'. This macho thing is true.*

The competition for rank in the hierarchical order appears to be judged on two levels by the 'evaluative eyes' of other men, demanding a symbolic display of 'real man' traits as well as the achievement of material success. This suggests that the power some men hold over other men operates through the hegemony of a narrowly defined ideal of masculinity and the maintenance of a hierarchically structured socio-economic order.

The School Experience

Socio-economic hierarchy can only be maintained through assigning value labels that determine and justify one's rank; and educational qualifications are the major determinants of wealth, status and power in Irish society. The education system, therefore, has a critical role to play in determining the life chances of Irish citizens. Through its policy and practice it can either legitimate or challenge the social order. While the White Paper on Adult Education endorses Community Education's vision of education as a tool for social change, it admits to "the weakness of early education systems in equalising educational attainment between socio-economic groups" as a "source of deep concern" (p49). Despite government's regular pledges to resource mainstream schooling to counter disadvantage:

> The education system has reproduced and is reproducing in its outputs, the socio-economic stratification that typifies other aspects of the life-experience of its clients. Attainment has become the most significant labour market currency and the profile of educational attainment in Ireland is markedly delineated along social class lines.
>
> **(ESF Programme Evaluation Unit, 1996, p37)**

As qualifications gained in mainstream education influence life-choices, the implications of the education system's failure to counter social and economic disadvantage cannot be understated. The study participants' testimonies provide some measure of insight into the plight of those failed by the education system. Their schooldays were predominantly depicted as fraught with struggle to preserve their dignity in the face of streaming, labelling and class discrimination:

> *If you were in the A class you were considered brainy, but if you were in a lower one you were considered dumb. It was horrible, you felt awful. I often think there was shame attached to the parents too, like Johnny next door is in A but my fellow is only in C.*
>
> *If you didn't do well your marks were made public. It was terrible.*
>
> *I'm working-class so because of the area I come from they shoved me into a class for which, if you like, I was ten times better. Unfortunately I slipped into the role of class messer.*
>
> *There was a two-tier system. I was from the wrong side of the track and I knew it.*

In hierarchical society, by the time any educational cohort reaches school age its members have already received different levels of health care, nutrition, shelter and clothing, depending on their socio-economic status. There follows ongoing disparity between the levels of material and emotional security they experience, as well as levels of access to educational and cultural activities. Their parents have had different experiences of the education system and thus hold different attitudes toward school and different capacities for educational support. Unless redressed, these disparities will continue to render their chances in the 'points race' unequal and the education system will thereby continue to mirror and perpetuate inequalities in the social order. The higher value bestowed on academic over vocational qualifications justifies the practice of streaming whereby students internalise their accorded value and worth in society's hierarchy and some are pushed out completely:

> *A lot of men in our group would have been, let's say encouraged to leave school early because they were told 'you're no good', 'you're going nowhere' and so forth. We find in our work that there are huge prejudices in teaching; there are huge prejudices and class issues that need to be sorted.*

As the school experience and its outcome is instrumental in the formation of one's identity and perception of self, it is hardly surprising that those not affirmed by the education system and consigned to the fringes of society should perceive themselves as lesser and inadequate. This reduced sense of self is demonstrated in participants' depictions of potential returnees to education as crippled with fear and feelings of inferiority:

> *The big one is fear. Am I able for it? There's no one to tell you you're good enough.*

> *People are afraid, they feel stupid, they feel they're not good enough.*

Indeed, participants' responses suggest that use of the phrase 'back to education' in the promotion of the concept of lifelong learning may act as a deterrent to some potential learners. Their contributions suggests that having experienced oneself as the object of public humiliation in school, the word 'back' in association with the word 'education' carries a negative connotation:

> *People are afraid of looking stupid in the classroom and in front of neighbours and friends. What will they think? They'll probably think that you must have been no good the first time that you have to go back.*

> *Many men wouldn't like it known that they have to go back to school.*

The study participants also depicted the bewildering and dehumanising effects of living under an ever-present threat of violence, a significant feature of their formative years:

There was a lot of violence from the teachers and the bullies. If you spoke you got a whack. If you were late you got a whack. Sometimes you didn't even know what you got a whack for. There was a lot of whacking, I couldn't wait to get out.

Sometimes you didn't know whether it was safer to be in the classroom or outside of it.

You got tough. You had to learn to defend yourself. Sometimes you picked on someone else to take the heat off you.

While the use of corporal punishment by teachers has been formally banned, the disturbing implications of schoolyard violence and bullying remains salient for today's school-going children and, indeed, wider society as participants point to the enduring impact and perpetuating nature of the experience of violence:

It took me a long time to get the courage to come in. I used to stand outside just looking at the place. I kept thinking back to my schooldays and I was full of fear. But I saw a totally different side of it when I came in. I couldn't believe it the way people were so nice in here. You didn't have to bully your way through here. You didn't have to be violent all the time. You didn't have to bully yourself through life.

Developing Identity

In observing the norms of masculine behaviour operative in their everyday lives, boys form perceptions of what it means to be a man and how to relate to the world. While a multiplicity of forces operate in the socialisation process, peer group dynamics play a central role in the construction of identity in the formative years. In the bid for social acceptance, dominant schoolyard culture which censures showing emotion, especially vulnerability, through violence and 'sissy' or 'gay' labelling reinforces macho values and "forecloses possibilities of different ways of being for boys" (Seidler, 1996, p116). Alternative ways of being may be negotiated for the self as social interaction extends beyond the schoolyard into other social spheres wherein identities are played out and contested. However, the findings suggest that the ability for fluidity and creativity in the construction of one's identity and reality is diminished by the debilitating impact of the experience of exclusion in school and wider society. The data suggest that loss of belief in the self through these experiences strengthens reliance on peer group approval as a source of affirmation of identity. Thus in a cultural setting wherein education is seen as something alien, peer pull acts as a strong barrier to participation:

I suppose the slagging in the pub stops people from coming to education. Some people take it personal which puts them off. I'd say that's the main thing that puts people off, the slagging. They say to themselves well I got this far without it. So there's a lot of pull there.

You're exposed when you step out of your accepted role as a man. Men don't go to college from a working-class background. You get stick from your mates. This gives you a huge fear of failure. It's a huge risk. You lose friends when you step out of your role and class.

Responses suggest that the erosion of belief in the self diminishes the capacity to be author of one's own identity, to write one's own script for life and to value oneself as a capable individual. With loss of ownership of the self, affirmation is increasingly externally sourced until identity comes to mean being the same as those around you, following the scripts of those around you. Thus, in a cultural arena wherein education has low currency value, participation may be perceived as threatening to an already fragile identity:

Education is a two-way system. It makes you different. If you're in the workforce it can go against you. Like if you're educated and in a job where a lot of men are not educated they will see you as a smart arse. So it can be a disadvantage. It puts you away from the rest of them. You're on your own because you're different.

This fear of difference is amplified by the threat of sanction by violence. Participants' use of the word homophobia refers not just to fear of homosexuals or homosexuality, but also to fear of the consequences of even being perceived as homosexual in the 'evaluative eyes' of other men:

Men fear they will be thought of as gay if they join a men's group and they're afraid of the consequences of that. Because the reality is that if you're 'outed' as a gay man, or you 'come out' as a gay man, whichever way it happens, you could get beaten up.

Violence by men against men who may either be gay or perceived to be gay is a stark reminder of the extreme to which the dynamics of reinforcing gender ideologies can reach and the level of acceptance of violence within male culture. One participant's reference to a group member's demeanour toward his son demonstrates the controlling role of fear in reproducing macho values:

He told me that he had never held his young son's hand because he thought the men on his street would think he was gay. Imagine that the conditioning had run so deep that ... he thought that holding his son's hand was a sign of gayness.

In such father-son interactions, fear of the 'evaluative eyes' works to sustain and reproduce the dominant version of 'real man' and his antipathy toward the 'sissy'. The depth of this internalised antipathy is illustrated in one participant's depiction of the discomfort he experienced on the first occasion he attended a men's group:

This is no reflection on anyone because I've changed a lot since then, but I have to say that I was very unnerved at first. It was one of those things where people sit around in a circle and as they introduce themselves they say a little bit about their personal lives. My first impulse was to make for the door. At one point the coordinator touched the hand of a speaker because he was a bit nervous and I thought that was a bit funny too. I felt uneasy. I wanted to get out of there but I was too far from the door to leave without making a fuss, so I decided to stick it out. Then I began to get interested in the stories the men were telling about their lives. At the end of the day the coordinator came over to us and I liked him immediately. I knew then for certain that there was nothing wrong, all my fears were gone, I even found myself saying that I had enjoyed it and making arrangements to come back again.

While the phrase "I've changed a lot since then" is indicative of success in contesting the limitations of hegemonic masculinity, many of the study participants' socially excluded peers are less able for the challenge. A participant's comment "I'd like to see men becoming less 'follow the crowd'" suggests that men around him have, through their life experiences, lost ownership of their own identities and thereby the ability to contest hegemonic masculinity and negotiate alternative ways of being in the world. In perceiving oneself as powerless and insignificant as 'cosmic dust' in a world ruled by men, following the script of hegemonic masculinity as the last affirmation of identity rigidly circumscribes ways of being and reproduces macho values.

Implications of Taboo Zone oppression

In circumscribing ways of being, Taboo Zone oppression has implications not just for participation in men's groups and other forms of education but even in life itself.

This macho thing is very strong in men's lives. If you actually say 'a men's group', it's not what it is, it's what it sounds like, they think it's a sissy thing to do. They think it's beneath them. They sneer at it; there must be something wrong with you if you join a men's group. These are the stigmas that have to be broken down.

You have to keep up your image and hide weakness. Men are not supposed to show emotion or talk about their problems 'cos that would be a sign of weakness. That's why they won't join men's groups in case they'll be thought of as a sissy.

The data suggests that repudiation of traits, behaviours and roles identified as 'feminine' inherent in the macho value system yields fear that participation in other forms of education also means entering the 'sissy' world:

There's mainly women in here and that's what men see when they first look into it. It puts them off.

Fear of being the only man in the class is a huge barrier.

Participants' contributions support McGivney's view that:

> Many working class men are experiencing a cruel dilemma: the kind of employment they want is in short supply but their sense of identity is so bound up with traditional labour that they find it difficult to engage in different jobs or alternative activities.
>
> (McGivney, 1999, p67)

As one participant phrased it:

The idea that we were the muscle, the hewers of wood and drawers of water, that we delivered this service and did this work, is still a very strong part of working-class identity. I'd love to see guys, instead of being involved in the manual masculine work, to do that if they want to, but for them to see that education enhances your well being, your confidence. It opens doors. I wish they didn't see themselves as dead-enders, as carrying out a role that their father carried out, and their grandfather before that.

Responses suggest that in working-class culture, the idea that men belong only in the workplace is sustained and reinforced through the controlling 'evaluative eyes' of peers. Thus, instead of perceiving education as the means for adjusting to change and improving life-chances, it is seen as a 'cop out' from the world of work:

It's very hard to come into education because people think you should be out in the Celtic Tiger. They think your copping out. You feel guilty. You beat yourself a bit.

There's a stigma about going into education. There's a big perception that men should be out working

As a man you're supposed to be the bread earner. You're supposed to be the one who can look after things. You're supposed to be strong in your way of thinking, you know? You're supposed to have all this, whatever it takes.

Changing Gender Roles

The study participants' contributions supported Kimmel's view that, "some men are bumping up against the limitations of the traditional definition of masculinity without much sense of direction about where to go to look for alternatives":

> *I think that for some men the idea of not having a pre-ordained role is frightening. They're frightened 'cos they've spent so much of their time being expected to do certain things and understanding that they're going into a certain role. But now these roles are being torn down around them and they're being told 'go your own way' and they don't know where to go. They've never had to think like that before. They've never had to think for themselves in this way. For the first time they really have to think for themselves and a lot of men are afraid of that.*

The study participants offered a wide range of insights into men's response to changing gender roles in the workplace and the home. Contributions suggest that, deprived of inner resources for authorship of their own identities and destinies, some men are experiencing a sense of displacement and confusion as the inherited script fails to fulfil its promise:

> *The woman is the breadwinner now instead of the man. That takes away the man's role as warrior chief of the household. That's devastating for some men.*

> *Many working-class men still have issues around women where they say their role is in the home; they still have this value system. There's a lot of conflict in working class relationships.*

While others signify a tone of resignation in the face of change:

> *I know some fellas that would sooner have it the old way. They're still living in their fathers' time, what they've seen in their lives, the way their fathers went on, they do the same thing. But there will always be changes and you have to accept those changes. There's no use looking back all the time because if you're looking backways you're going nowhere.*

And others yet again want to challenge and rewrite the script:

> *I never thought I would fit into what was happening when I was growing up. I never agreed with nine-to-five, male-female traditional roles where the man went to work and the woman stayed at home. I never wanted to be part of that, it horrified me. I think it's a thing to be decided between both partners. I think society has changed for the better. The more flexibility around gender roles the better.*

One participant's contribution highlighted the depth of consciousness of the ever-watchful 'evaluative eyes' in setting the parameters of gender roles:

> *If the wives want painting done or the grass cut or windows cleaned, men will do those jobs. But regards doing the washing or looking after young babies, I don't really know any man who does that sort of thing. I'd say if he did it would be a sort of indoor thing, you know?*

Participation in Life

The frequency with which the study participants used the phrases 'we're not supposed to' and 'we are supposed to' regarding traits, behaviours and roles, demonstrates the extent to which the imperatives of the macho script have been internalised. While fear of being perceived as 'sissy' in the 'evaluative eyes' is an overwhelming barrier to participation in men's groups and other forms of education, Taboo Zone oppression reaches its most debilitating and damaging proportions when it acts as a barrier to life itself. The study participants highlighted suicide as an everyday risk and threat in their lives. Almost every participant had been acquainted with at least one, often several, men who had killed themselves; with more than one participant disclosing 'I was almost there myself'. "They couldn't talk to anyone, they couldn't hack the isolation" was repeatedly cited as the most likely driving force behind these deaths; suggesting that the source of male isolation lies in following, at all costs, the hegemonic script of masculinity as 'strong':

> *Men are supposed to be strong. They're not supposed to show emotion, especially to other men, because that would be a sign of weakness.*

> *Men are isolated. You see, we're not supposed to talk to each other. We're not supposed to talk about our problems over a cup of tea the way women do.*

> *Men feel that they are weak if they need help. Men can't ask for help, we're not supposed to do that.*

While the ideological construction of masculinity as 'strong' and superior to 'weak' femininity has profound implications for power relations between men and women it also serves as a mechanism to maintain unequal relations of power between men. The barrier it poses to joining men's groups and to men 'talking to each other' has a two-fold effect. It isolates men emotionally; and it obstructs opportunities for critical reflection on the systems and structures that oppress some men as well as women. The National Economic and Social Forum points to the "dramatic widening of the gap between the poor and the better off in the period 1994-99". It also points to the government's failure to meet the National Anti-Poverty Strategy's educational target of raising the percentage of students completing the senior cycle; arguing that "policies have not been sufficiently supportive of the pupils, families, schools and communities concerned" (NESF, 2000, pp18-19). Ideologies of class and gender achieve hegemony through winning the consent of the subordinated to the systems and structures that oppress them; and the patriarchal power structure is as damaging to some men as it is to women. It takes away the very essence of self from men so defeated by their experiences as to perceive themselves as meaningless and insignificant as 'a piece of cosmic dust'. Hegemonic dynamics reach harrowing proportions when men, so governed by Taboo Zone oppression as to be unable to write their own scripts, believe there is only one way to be and if you can't live up to it, you're not good enough to live:

> *For most men, when something happens, they would take the suicide route rather than admit they are weak. A man can't talk about his feelings to other people, he's not supposed to do that, so they burn him up and eat him away from the inside. Then all he can do to make them stop is to end them. And the only way he sees to end them is by taking his own life. It's probably the only way he can find peace.*

Section 2: Emerging from Taboo Zone

> *Imagine yourself being compressed inside a box for twenty-five years and then someone takes the lid off that box. You get this sense of freedom. I mean there is something inside of us all that has been compressed, or hasn't been let out. When it is released you really get that feeling.*

This speaker's metaphorical depiction of himself as having been 'compressed inside a box' echoes the sense of alienation and oppression experienced by the 'cosmic dust' speaker; while his newfound 'sense of freedom' mirrors the joy of feeling 'truly truly alive'. Across all the learning environments, participants pointed to the experiencing of self in new ways as the essence of their learning experience:

> *You learn a lot about yourself really. You learn about what you can do, that you can do things you never thought you could do. You learn to think for yourself, weigh things up and decide what you think, you know?*

> *You're learning about life, about yourself, that you're more than what society told you you are.*

> *I'm learning about who the real me is and what the real me can do.*

First Base Headspace

So how is this reclaiming of the self facilitated and achieved?

> *The headspace here is what's doing me more good than anything else, it's great.*

> *Here I can relax and learn again because everyone is given their own headspace and the time and encouragement to use it.*

> *This is a safe space for men. The one thing we all respect and insist on is confidentiality. What is said is private and we all know confidences won't be betrayed.*

The study participants' emphases on 'headspace' and 'safe space' as the fundamental, most cherished aspects of their learning environments resulted in coinage of the term First Base Headspace to encapsulate the intrinsic elements of the learning experience. The First Base Headspace experience facilitates transition from feeling as 'a piece of cosmic dust' to becoming 'truly truly alive'. While Chapter Five looks at how the models of practice

incorporate First Base Headspace into their programmes, the remainder of this chapter is given to the participants' articulation of the meaning of that experience as it affects their interior world. Their responses signify the attainment of First Base Headspace as a major breakthrough in their lives and a point of no return in the reclaiming of self.

The majority of participants had experienced Taboo Zone oppression and, from the vantage point of First Base Headspace, contrasted previous perceptions of themselves and their relationship with the world with new visions for self and others. The most salient theme that emerged was a newfound realisation that there is not just one, but many, ways of being in the world; and that scripts can be challenged. Their new perceptions of themselves and their new relationship with the world demonstrate the power of education to facilitate change.

One participant demonstrated his ability to countermand peer pull, identifying fear as the driving force behind the slagging:

> *With the confidence of ease with yourself you know it's just the once-off thing of saying it in the pub and leaving it at that. The fella that's slagging probably wants to do the same thing but he's afraid.*

Others spoke of new ways of relating to family and friends, demonstrating increased awareness of and sensitivity toward the feelings of others:

> *I've changed dramatically. My family would tell you I used to be a bit rough because I didn't know how to communicate. I used to argue with my children, I never listened to them, I never talked to them. But now I talk to them and I try to find out how they are feeling about things. All my relationships are much better now.*

> *Coming here to classes you get to know when to say hello and when not to say anything. You learn to gauge people's mood and if it's best to leave them alone for a while, or if it's best to chat to them.*

In the light of their previous life experiences, the study participants expressed deep concern about the plight of other socially excluded men and spoke of the First Base Headspace experience as a source of courage in considering themselves as role models and beacons of hope:

> *I think of myself as a bit of an example for other men. If I can do it, they can as well. I'm only an ordinary person, you know?*

> *I know how being part of all this has changed me, I know what it could do for other men and I want to play my role in that. I want to be a part of that.*

I'd like to model a sense of maleness that's not about presenting an image of having it all together but that's about showing more of our struggle. I think that would make it easier for other men.

Participants also spoke of their successes in challenging the 'men don't talk about their emotions' imperative of the macho script:

Men in general don't talk. I could say to you now 'I feel sad', 'I feel depressed', 'I'm scared' - these are not words that men use. Of the thirty or forty men I know, not one of them would say that to you, to their wives, to their girlfriends or to their bosses, but I'm not afraid to use these words.

One participant powerfully demonstrated the role of education in helping him make sense of his life through the confusion and sense of displacement he experienced when the inherited gender role script let him down:

Well I think what was happening, if I can explain, is that women in this area started doing personal development and other courses. They started building up their confidence, then they started going for the jobs. So they were out of the house more and more. It was very frustrating. Instead of having a wife in the house with you, suddenly, bang, she's gone! It just feels very frustrating. It's frustrating because I suppose a lot of men want to see themselves in a relationship where they are the 'main man' in the family. More or less, it was through being able to enter a world of creative expression that helped me. I suppose what it made me realise was that I had a lot of control in the early stages, so I was losing, not my power but her power. She was taking back her own power, that's what she was doing. So that would have been a turning point, when I got into the writing. I started to see life differently, I began to see the bigger picture.

'No pressure' was the most frequently offered off-the-cuff response when participants were asked to identify aspects of their educational environments that contributed to their continuing engagement in the learning process. Their elaboration of the term revealed a range of assigned meanings to include absence of a sense of competition and freedom to develop and learn at one's own pace:

There's no pressure here. We're all on one footing, we're not in competition with each other. You go about your life trying to get to where you're going and thinking that to be macho and strong is the be all and end all. But you see that doesn't come into it here. No one tries to be better than anyone else. There is no best story, no worst story. There's no pressure because the competition is gone.

The great thing about it is that there's no rush on you, you don't have to keep up with everyone else, the tutors let you set the pace, you can ask for something easier if you want to, and work your way up to the harder stuff. When there's no pressure you relax and it's easy to learn when you're relaxed.

Feeling valued and respected emerged as the most overwhelming, 'hard to believe' dimension of participants' learning experiences:

I don't know how to explain this but I've really got a kind of a faith ... a faith in the human race again. That's true because I didn't trust anyone before coming here. And I found that the people I trusted have kept that confidence. I mean, they could easily think that they're wasting their time with me, that I'm unteachable, but they don't, they invest their time in me and they encourage me. It's hard to believe.

When I first started here and the tutors were so decent, so kind, I found it difficult to understand. I couldn't understand their generosity. I used to wonder 'what do they want off me?' I just couldn't understand the generosity of them giving their time to learning you and re-learning you again and again if you didn't understand. I'd never gotten this before and I couldn't understand it. But the more I got to understand it the better I felt. And that's what happens to people when they come in here. When you meet these people and they're so understanding and they've so much time for you, you really open yourself up. It's tremendous.

I can hardly believe I'm part of all this. I have so many people who really care about me, who really care about how life treats me.

There is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that a perception prevails in the public mind that Social Welfare recipients are not interested in education for education's sake, but rather, participation is motivated by monetary gain in a culture of dependency. It is noteworthy that a homeless speaker should contradict this perception in relating the following story:

A friend of mine asked me recently 'what are you on now?' so I told him I was on CE. He asked me how much I was getting and when I told him I was getting £95 he said 'what?'. You see, he's on CE too and he's getting £120. Of course I pointed out that he has children so it's different circumstances, but he said 'I don't care, I wouldn't work for £95'. I said to him 'Excuse me, I'm not working, I'm keeping my brain occupied, I'm not interested in the money, I do classes, it's not about the money, it's about learning'.

As one speaker disclaimed the notion of a culture of dependency another participant proclaimed a culture of education:

> *We need to create a culture of education, in the sense that it's acceptable for everyone to do it and everyone can do it.*

Chapter Five explores the foundations upon which such a 'culture of education' might be cultivated through looking at how the models of practice incorporate First Base Headspace into their programmes.

Chapter Five

Models of Practice and their Philosophical Approaches

While the five learning environments differ operationally and in their purpose and function in the community, a universal value system may be evidenced across their methodologies:

- Providing individual responses to individual needs
- Restoring self-belief and thereby inspiring agency in the learner
- Building facilitator / tutor - learner relationships on a foundation of mutual respect and trust
- Providing a non-threatening, non-competitive, flexible and confidential environment
- Facilitating the acquisition of skills in a purposeful and meaningful way

These elements form the core hallmarks of the First Base Headspace value system. The Human Resource / Employability paradigm, the Social Cohesion / Human Potential and the Equality paradigm underpin the work of all five programmes. In other words, they are concerned not just with combating unemployment per se, but work in a variety of ways to support the development of human potential and social cohesion.

Providing Individual Responses to Individual Needs

All five environments provide individual responses to individual needs, commencing with work to break isolation and restore a sense of self worth in the programme participant:

> *Most of the blocks to students' learning, I mean academic learning and learning in life, are actually personal blocks that have nothing to do with learning deficiencies, they have to do with the self. They have to do with lack of confidence and low self-esteem, things like that within the self. So personal development, building confidence and working on social skills are the fundamentals that we address before, or at least hand-in-hand with qualifications. I mean the bulk of our students are on the verge of being socially excluded, on the verge of it.*

> *If you're isolated from other human beings you have to start with learning how to relate to people again. That's the starting point for your education. I've seen men come in here and there wouldn't be a word out of them for a long time. Then eventually they would relax, have a cup of tea or a game of cards and a chat. They thaw out through the chats and begin to steady themselves. Eventually they become more natural and fall in with the usual banter and conversation at the centre. I've seen men slowly rebuild their lives and move on from here. It's invisible really what the centre actually does, but it does do it.*

Before we can even start on education we have to break some of the ice around the isolation. I couldn't tell you how low in self-esteem they are and it stems from the isolation. We can only crack the eggshell and they have to make the omlette. By just being natural, chatting over a cup of tea, it's so simple what we do yet it has such an impact, because in the process they're changing, they're changing from being in the shell to breaking out. It's just a bit of human warmth, yet it's so fundamental to starting the process of development.

Inspiring Agency in the Learner

While all five learning environments work in different ways to inspire agency in their programme participants and equip them to take control of their own destinies, the models of practice at Newbridge VTOS and South East Men's Network offer the most notable examples of this approach.

Through the Personalised Learning (PL) principle operant at Newbridge VTOS centre, students are encouraged and supported in identifying the direction they want their lives to take and the skills and competencies they need to acquire to achieve their aims. Through setting and reviewing goals for self within the programme and for life beyond, the student develops awareness of his own potential to bring about change. Practicing self-appraisal and decision-making through the PL process works to equip the student to take ownership of his own identity and destiny; to move from feeling as powerless as 'a piece of cosmic dust' to becoming 'truly truly alive'. That is not to suggest that this transition is a magical overnight occurrence. Rather, it is a painstakingly facilitated process involving challenges for both the learner and practitioner. VTOS students spoke of the 'fear' goal setting instilled in them at the outset, an understandable fear when considered against the loss of ownership of self that characterises Taboo Zone oppression and the struggle involved in regaining a sense of self as a competent, capable, autonomous individual. VTOS students took pains, however, to point out that while goal setting was a 'fearful' task, their fears were allayed to a great extent by the understanding and empathy they sensed in their tutors; underlining the importance of developing trusting tutor-student relationships. The coordinator at Newbridge VTOS spoke of the challenges tutors face in practicing and realising the PL ideal:

The PL principle means focussing on process rather than product. Most of our tutors come from a teaching background where the focus is on the end product, which is always the exam results. So our tutors have had to work very hard at shifting from being product-centred to being process-centred; from being subject-centred to being student-centred. Developing this model requires a lot of flexibility, ongoing critical reflection and constant intensive staff development work. This is a very challenging, but also a very worthwhile process.

The South East Men's Network inspires agency in its programme participants through heightening awareness of the systems and structures that oppress them:

> *It's when you come up against society's structures because you've children going to school, you've children going to the doctor, you've children interacting with various institutions, that you begin to look at society in a different way. So if a man is from a deprived background it will give him an awareness of the inequalities in society's structures when he sees his children being treated differently, or being ill-treated because of their background. Our approach gives men an awareness of the issues that impact on their lives. Our groups provide an opportunity for men to address those issues, to understand them and develop strategies for dealing with them and to develop the confidence to implement those strategies.*

The South East Men's Network sees its key task as challenging the hegemonic model of masculinity, and class and gender inequalities in the social order:

> *I think we all experience life the way we experience it and it's often based on the model that we see before us. We take on the model because it's all we have to go by. Changing the model of masculinity is an enormous task but it's central to the vision and work of the SEMN.*

> *We are working to bring about social change and gender liberation. There is a difference between gender equality and gender liberation. Gender equality is when, within all the existing structures of society, women get the same opportunities as men and the same access to all parts of the existing society. Then you have gender equality but nothing has changed, the structures are the same. Liberation for both genders is when the structures change and we're looking at how we want to arrange our relationships with each other and relationships within society as a whole. So that raises the question what steps are we going to take to bring about change? We have to begin with ourselves, with changing our own attitudes as men and in so doing, making life better for those around us. That's the first step.*

This aspect of the South East Men's Network model of practice involves facilitated discussion and group work on gender and social analysis whereby:

> *The men are encouraged and supported to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. By that I mean that they are encouraged to change their behaviour where new information makes sense as an enhancement to their lives and the lives of those around them.*

Building Relationships and Providing a Flexible, Attuned and Safe Environment

All five environments give priority to building relationships on a foundation of mutual respect and trust; and providing a non-threatening, non-competitive, flexible and confidential environment. At Newbridge VTOS and DALC these aspirations are achieved through provision of mentoring, and one-to-one or small group tuition where programme participants are allowed to progress and develop at their own pace. For facilitators, this approach requires a high degree of sensitivity toward students' needs and versatility in catering for those needs. While all the study participants valued the element of confidentiality in their learning environments, it emerged as a key concern for those involved in men's groups. It is fair to suggest that, ever aware of the 'evaluative eyes', the self-disclosure dimension of men's development work renders participants feeling vulnerable to the threat of ridicule or slagging for engaging in 'unmanly' behaviour. If this be so, nurturing trust and guaranteeing confidentiality works to undermine the exercise of control by men over men through the mechanism of slagging.

Facilitating Acquisition of Skills in a Purposeful and Meaningful Context

Facilitating the acquisition of skills and competencies in a purposeful and meaningful way is in evidence in four of the learning environments. The Liberties Men's Group is an exception in this regard as it acts as a 'gateway to education' through linking men to relevant programmes and supporting them through the process rather than offering education in its own right.

Making the programme content relevant to the everyday lives of participants is a key feature of DALC's approach to making learning meaningful. For instance, literacy tutors select reading material based on the interests, hobbies and lifestyles of their students; writing skills are developed through such activities as preparing shopping lists or writing greeting cards to friends; and numeracy is addressed through such means as calculating the cost of household items.

Designing their own learning plan and selecting modules which best suit their individual needs, plans and goals gives purpose and meaning to the learning process for students at VTOS in Newbridge.

At SEMN the acquisition of a range of inter-personal and practical skills is facilitated as participants plan, organise and host workshops, seminars and conferences on men's issues. Training modules over the course of these activities develop administration, negotiation, facilitation, communication and computer skills in a meaningful and purposeful context.

Ballymun Men's Centre takes an innovative approach to developing skills in a meaningful context as programme participants host slots on a local radio station whereby:

The most important aspect for the men themselves is that they feel they are being listened to, they feel important, but at the same time they are developing vital communication and presentation skills.

It is noteworthy that the majority of study participants valued opportunities for creative expression. One participant pointed to his engagement in amateur drama productions as the means of overcoming his fear of making mistakes: "I will chance things now that I never would have before, and I can laugh if I make a mistake".

An Outstanding Feature of Newbridge VTOS Model of Practice

The need for provision of professional psychological counselling and support on the journey from Taboo Zone to First Base Headspace emerged as a key concern for the majority of the study participants. While those participating in DALC programmes and men's groups expressed regret at the absence of such support from their respective programmes, those participating in Newbridge VTOS welcomed and appreciated its presence. Thus, VTOS apart, psychological counselling is not an integral part of the learning environments, but referrals are made on a 'felt need' basis. The success with which Newbridge VTOS has integrated this important dimension of its model of practice deserves considerable attention. Sadly, the centre's coordinator explained that this service was introduced as a direct outcome of the traumatic impact of the tragic suicides of two male students. In purposefully intending to minimise perceived stigma at 'being seen' going to counselling, Newbridge VTOS introduced its professional counsellor in an innovative, creative and productive way:

So what we decided, and it has worked, was that the counsellor should be seen as an integral part of what we do, therefore he would have to do some tutoring as well. So we introduced a psychology course and therefore he is seen as being just like everybody else, a natural part of it all. At the same time I am very clear with the students about his function here, that he is here to support them through whatever problems they may have. The strategy proved to have several advantages. Firstly, the counsellor's role as tutor makes it much easier for people to approach him and to be seen approaching him. Secondly, he can tailor his module to address identified needs. And thirdly he is a great support to the tutors and he plays a leading role in staff development and training.

Indeed, it is worth arguing that if the philosophical, methodological and pedagogical approach of Newbridge VTOS was to be extended nationwide it would do much to counter Ronayne's disturbing finding that VTOS has placed itself "out of reach" for the very people it was designed to serve.

A Notable Feature of the Models of Practice across Men's Groups

A noteworthy feature of the models of practice across the men's groups is that the founders and facilitators have themselves made the journey from Taboo Zone to First Base Headspace. These study participants saw this as a key advantage, suggesting that their programme participants 'pick this up' and therefore relate to them in a trusting way and identify with them as realistic role models:

> *You see I've gone through the shit myself. I've learned a lot because I've pulled myself apart, I've been right down there and come back up again. I've asked a lot of questions of myself and I think I can relate to people because of that and I think the men pick this up from me and trust me.*

> *I went back to education myself and it was a very wonderful but very tough road. It made me realise that you need support through the education process and that's why I founded the group. So I find myself in a position of leadership but I don't think the guys see me as a leader as such. It's not reverence, if you know what I mean. I think they relate to me because I've already done what they're doing now. I think they see me as a support without being dependent on me. I think they look at me and say 'if he did it, I can do it too', so I'm a token in that way.*

> *In working with men on men's issues, I think it's important that facilitators of that process have experience of working through those issues themselves on a personal level, rather than a sort of academic approach. People who've gone through that experience themselves have real insights on what's involved in the process.*

All the study participants spoke of the important role of time in the learning process, pointing out that the journey from Taboo Zone to First Base Headspace is long, arduous and therefore slow:

> *You need a lot of persistence and patience in recruiting and retaining programme participants, You need to get them involved in activities, to hold their interest while the personal development work is going on at a subtle level. It all takes a long time before it bears fruit.*

> *Nothing happens overnight, it takes a long time to build relationships before you can do anything else.*

> *The gradual, gentle approach is best but that takes time. It takes years to change attitudes.*

Recruitment to Learning Programmes

The majority of the study participants had come to their respective learning programmes through hearing of it by word of mouth from someone they knew and trusted or through the encouragement they received from friends already participating. Others had joined their programmes as an outcome of their voluntary involvement with groups in their communities such as youth clubs, tenants and residents' organisations or drop-in centres for the unemployed. The remainder had been referred to their programmes by such agencies as FAS or DSCFA local office.

While Newbridge VTOS identified agency referral as a successful means of recruitment, DALC named its highest drop-out cohort as those referred by DSCFA, and DALC students suggested that feeling compelled to attend rendered DSCFA referred students uncommitted and distracting. It is noteworthy, however, that one study participant who had been referred by a female member of staff at his DSCFA local office spoke very highly of 'the woman who changed my life'. Clearly, the approach and attitude of agency personnel in the referral process has a profound impact on levels of participation and commitment.

The study participants suggested that the introduction of a comprehensive information centre where one could find out about education / training programmes and the financial implications of participation might go some way toward increasing male participation. The majority, however, identified programme participants as the best agents for encouraging and recruiting other men:

> *I went into the Labour Exchange one day and I just started chatting to men signing on. I started telling them what education has done for me, how it has changed my life. They'll listen to the likes of me 'cos they can see I'm like them. It's not the same if an official in the Labour Exchange tells them about it, they feel under pressure to come. But if they see what it's done for me, they're more inclined to give it a try.*

> *The main thing is to get men to see what's there by talking to them casually. If I'm in the pub I tell other men how good it is and say things like 'will you give it a go?'. There are a lot of men living in hardship, possibly feeling suicidal, wondering how they're going to get through. It's up to us to get it across to them that there is support there.*

Chapter Six

Issues, Implications and Recommendations

> *As yet, nothing is written down about men's groups. There is no handbook or guidebook, we simply have to do the best we can. I suppose we'll learn through mistakes and errors and we'll find our way around it.*

The words of this founding member of a men's group bring the pioneering nature of the task facing providers of this nascent form of education for men into sharp focus. This study represents but a small foray into an area of study that is not well documented in Ireland. However, the honesty and depth of participants' disclosures yield invaluable insight into the challenges men, especially marginalised men, face in a rapidly changing world; and the models of practice offer the foundation upon which philosophies and methodologies can be developed to facilitate men in meeting and overcoming those challenges.

Models of Practice

Three years ago, reviewing the social impact of grants on men's groups, Cousins (1997a) suggested:

> Perhaps one of the weaknesses of much work in men's development has been an assumption that models which have worked with women's groups can simply be transferred to men's groups. The record to date would suggest that this is not the case.
>
> (Cousins, 1997a, p39)

Cousins suggested that the development of thought and analysis on the position of women in Irish society that had been ongoing since the 1960s provided the basis for the development of a conceptual framework to underpin women's development work from the 1980s onward. By contrast, he argued, "such a conceptual framework is lacking in the case of men" (p39). Thus, with different issues impacting on their lives, models of practice that are successful in women's development may be completely inappropriate for men. In order to forge a conceptual framework to underpin men's development, Cousins pointed to the urgent need for research to identify the particular issues of concern to men and to document models of practice; and this study has attempted to take a small step in this direction.

Cousins (1997a) held up the South East Men's Network as "a possible model for developing men's groups" (p46). The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs' (1999) positive appraisal of the social impact of the work of the SEMN and the findings of this study support Cousins' view. Perhaps the most notable aspect of the SEMN model lies in its focus on particular issues within male culture, such as homophobia and the construction of masculinity, within a wider framework of gender and social analysis in pursuit of a better society for all.

The success of the AONTAS Women's Education Networks Development Initiative (WENDI) demonstrates the benefit of networking as a mechanism for providing support to a myriad of educational environments through sharing of experiences, expertise and knowledge. In view of this, government support for a networking process amongst the growing number of disparate men's groups would do much to assist in their survival, development and cohesion. The ongoing expansion of the SEMN and birth this year of Dublin Men's Coalition (comprising ten groups), along with the forthcoming publication *SEMN Men's Development Project: Methodology and Practice*, represent significant moves toward sharing of concerns, ideas and practices fundamental to the forging of a coherent framework for men's development. The White Paper concedes that:

> The fact that there is no forum in which adult and community educators can come together as a distinct and recognised professional group is a major deficit in laying down solid foundations for the ongoing development of the field.
>
> (*Learning for Life*: White Paper on Adult Education, 2000, p153)

If implemented, the White Paper's proposal for the establishment of a Forum for Adult Education Practitioners would significantly enhance the development of men's groups within the field of community education. The advantages of such a forum would lie in the opportunity it would create for exchange of ideas, sharing of good practice, and most importantly, the opportunity to inform policy development.

Despite their differing purposes, and government's emphasis on skills shortages, the models of practice in this study demonstrate the need to give primacy to the Human Potential / Social Cohesion paradigm over the Human Resource / Employability paradigm during the initial stages of return to the education process. Arguably, increased employability follows as a corollary within any model that facilitates the development of a sense of self as valued, capable and autonomous and the acquisition of skills both for learning and for life.

It could be suggested that the goal setting dimension of the model of practice at Newbridge VTOS could be adapted for facilitating the personal development of participants in men's groups. Arguably, identifying one's own personal goals and practicing decision-making and self-appraisal play a key role in facilitating the participant to reclaim ownership of his own identity and take control of his own destiny.

In similar fashion, the facilitated group discussion on men's issues within the models of practice in men's groups, could be incorporated into the approach of DALC and Newbridge VTOS. Indeed, the coordinator at VTOS pointed to the mooting of this approach amongst the staff team:

It's very obvious that men are in the minority here and they tend to stick together a lot. We're very conscious of this and one of the things we have discussed at staff level is the idea of setting up a forum for men, you know like focus groups for men where they could discuss issues. I suppose our fear is holding us back. What would we call it? How would we introduce it?

As the 'men don't talk to each other' imperative of the macho script emerged not just as a barrier to joining men's groups, but more importantly, as the cause of isolation, even suicide, a properly facilitated forum for men to discuss issues of concern could only enhance their learning experiences. Provision of a confidential environment in which to articulate their feelings on a range of issues; and the implicit signal that it is socially acceptable for men to discuss their views and feelings with each other; could contribute to breaking one of the most debilitating taboos in men's lives. It is noteworthy that across the five learning environments, the men who contributed to the focus group discussions for this study appeared very comfortable with each other as they communicated their feelings on very sensitive issues within male culture. Indeed, the vast majority of participants expressed their enjoyment of the experience at the end of the discussions.

Government Support and Funding

The length of time needed for facilitating the journey from Taboo Zone to First Base Headspace must be taken account of by those who allocate funding and resources for education at all levels of the existing and proposed new system. Top down resource allocation must be sufficient to support the development of a coherent educational framework within which socially excluded people have adequate time and support to develop and progress at their own pace. While this aspiration underpins the White Paper's proposed new education systems and structures, it is vital that the amount of time and level of support necessary for reintegration of socially excluded people is not underestimated.

The study findings suggest that, for marginalised men, the barriers to participation in education that are most difficult to overcome are located deep within the self and stem from the sense of powerlessness and alienation that characterises Taboo Zone oppression. In this view, intensive personal support through the long process of reclaiming the self offers real and viable means of reintegrating the socially excluded and equipping them for further participation in the educational and wider social spheres. While all the learning environments in the study operate on this premise, the provision of a professional counselling service at Newbridge VTOS stands out as a key mechanism in its support structure. The high value VTOS participants placed on the availability of this service and the remaining participants' recognition of the need for such support demonstrates the acute need for government funding to be directed into a more speedy development of such specialised support, than that outlined in the White Paper (pp159-162). It must be stated, however, that the study participants took pains to point out that "it's not that marginalised men are a problem but some of them have problems as a result of their life circumstances and are consequently in need of professional specialised support"

Training

Understanding and addressing the plight of the socially excluded in Irish society demands a high level of commitment to training in a number of areas, if inequalities in the social order are to be redressed.

At grass roots level this requires implementing a support structure for Community Education practitioners who, if lacking formally recognised qualifications, bring insights from their own life experiences to their work and have developed on the ground expertise in successfully facilitating the journey from Taboo Zone to First Base Headspace. It is thus vital that the White Paper's proposed structures for recognition and accreditation of the unique work of Community Education practitioners be implemented as a priority.

The government proposed referral networks to be established within the National Adult Literacy Programme, and such initiatives as Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs' Case Management Strategy, highlight the need for training of frontline agency personnel. The study participants' testimonies suggest discrepancies in the signals received from DSCFA during the referral process. It is thus vital that frontline staff be made aware of whether the Human Resource / Employability or the Social Cohesion / Human Potential paradigm is driving the strategy. In other words, it must be made clear to frontline personnel whether their mandate is to direct people primarily toward employment / training based programmes or if they should equally encourage clients to participate in education for self-development.

In view of the study participants' suggestion that programme participants are key potential agents for recruitment of their peers, NALA's model of training its programme participants in informal recruitment strategies could be developed amongst those involved in other forms of community education, especially men's groups. (Bailey & Coleman, 1998)

The study participants' school experience highlights the acute need for increased funding to be directed at enhancement of support systems for both teachers and pupils in the school environment. With twelve thousand unqualified teachers currently operating in the school system, the White Paper's pledge to "continue to support the school system with additional resources to counter educational underachievement" rings hollow (p49). The countering of educational underachievement demands huge human and financial resources to develop a policy and practice of affirmative action. The current under-resourced, unstable situation can do little to enable schools to implement strategies that must be underpinned by intense holistic teacher training, forging a team approach amongst staff and building solid teacher-pupil relationships inclusive of all students. Unless schools are adequately resourced to implement and sustain such policy and practice, the school system will continue to mirror and perpetuate inequalities in the social order.

Male Identity

The question of male identity in today's world emerged as a central concern in the lives of the study participants and their peers. The study findings suggest that the contradiction between a narrowly defined stereotypical masculinity and the reality of their everyday experiences is eliciting a range of responses from men. While at one end of the spectrum men are working to challenge hegemonic masculinity and negotiate alternative ways of relating to the world; men at the opposite end of the spectrum appear to be experiencing a sense of confusion and dislocation as the inherited script of masculinity lets them down. The Department of Education and Science's Exploring Masculinities Programme (EM), to be introduced to all boys' schools at Transition Year level, represents a first step in equipping boys to critically reflect on and challenge gender ideologies that restrict ways of being and result in sexism, prejudice and discrimination. The potential of EM to break the cycle of reproduction of macho values through schoolyard culture and the sensitive nature of its content place demands on the school that must be adequately resourced. To be effective, delivery of EM must be underpinned by a high level of teacher training and a support network for both boys and teachers as they address and deal with sensitive issues.

The entrenchment of macho values in Irish schoolyard culture is demonstrated in Lynch and Lodge's (1999) disturbing finding that "peer group values of boys have changed little, in terms of how they define masculinity, since previous research ten years ago". In defining manhood, the boys predominantly equated masculinity with physical strength, height and sporting ability; and high levels of hostility and fear were reported toward gay males. The extent to which "what could clearly be defined as sexist practices and procedures went largely unnoticed or disregarded by students" emerged as a key finding in the study (cited in EM, 2000, pvii). In view of these findings, and if successfully implemented, the Exploring Masculinities programme represents a significant step forward in raising awareness of gender issues in the formative years.

Further Research

The scope of this study was restricted by limitations on such resources as time and finance; and its findings indicate need for further research in a number of areas. AONTAS thus welcomes the proposed establishment of a Research Unit within the structure of a National Adult Learning Council as a potential means of further inquiry into key questions arising from this study.

While the construction and meaning of masculinity has been debated in academia and the media in the UK and America during the 1990s, the issue has received little attention until recently in Ireland. The centrality of this theme to the study is indicative of its importance, highlighting the need for further research into the relationship between definitions of masculinity and participation in the educational and wider social spheres. Building a body of research to identify men's needs and concerns would greatly assist in the design and delivery of education programmes that are attractive to men, best serve their needs and thereby enhance their lives.

As the field of Community Education increases in stature there is profound need for research to evaluate and document the wide range of models of practice operative in the sector. Building such a body of knowledge would greatly assist in developing, shaping and tailoring the Community Education sector in tune with participants' needs.

Such a developing body of research is necessary to underpin, not just men's development but also to track the extent to which the Lifelong Learning and Anti-Poverty agenda are being met; and to evaluate Ireland's performance against her EU and American counterparts.

Appendix 1

Focus Group Discussion Format

Introductions - from facilitator and researcher

Welcome participants - Explain purpose of research and guarantee confidentiality

Any questions before we begin - would anyone like to leave?

Ask participants to briefly introduce themselves, saying how and why they joined their programmes

Whole group discussion –	Experiences of Formal Education
Work in small groups –	Are there barriers to men's participation in education / training? If so, can you name them?

Feedback from each group

Work in small groups –	How might men be encouraged to participate in education / training?

Feedback from each group

Coffee Break

Whole Group Discussions	a) Men and the Family b) Men and Employment c) Men and Education d) Men's issues of concern to you or your friends

Volunteers for one-to-one interviews to further explore issues flagged up?

Thank you and Close

Appendix 2

Interview Guideline

Questions are predominantly open ended to allow participants freedom to expand and elaborate on issues flagged up at focus group discussions

Introduction - remind participant of purpose of research and guarantee confidentiality

Can you talk to me about your experience of school, what were your schooldays like?
- age leaving?
- qualifications?
- why left?

Since leaving school did you attend any education or training courses, say by night, part-time, full-time, in your job or in the community?

Would you tell me about your working life? What kind of work have you been doing? Are you working now?

So you're participating in an educational programme now. How did you hear about it?

How did you feel about joining when you first heard of the programme?
- what made you feel that way?

How did you feel walking in on your first day? What was that day like for you?

How do you feel about it now?
- what is it about the place or the people that makes you feel this way?
- what is it about the place or the people that keeps you involved?

Can you tell me about the programme here?
- what you like best
- other aspects of the programme
- aspects that are difficult for you

Will you talk to me about what you've learned through coming here?

What has coming here meant to you? Has it changed you in any way?

What kind of things do you think stop other men from joining a programme like this?
- could you talk to me a bit more about that?

What do you think would be the best way to encourage other men to join?

Do you remember at the focus group we spoke a lot about men's role in society today, how a lot of things are changing for men, and for women, what did you think of all that? Does it make any difference to you, or to your friends?

- at home
- at work
- to do with education
- other aspects of your life
- your relationships with women
- your relationships with other men

Do you think you could talk to me about men's issues that are of concern to you or your friends? Are they the same or different to the men's issues that were discussed at the focus group?

For Facilitators \ Coordinators

Could you take me through key aspects of your model of practice and the thinking behind it?

- Purpose and aims of your programme
- Recruitment methods: successes and failures
- Processes and content of programmes
- Funding issues
- Any other issues

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Imagine yourself being compressed inside a box for twenty-five years and then someone takes the lid off that box. You get this sense of freedom. I mean there is something inside of us all that has been compressed, or hasn't been let out. When it is released you really get that feeling.

Story Participant

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